

TESTIMONY OF THE CONNECTICUT JUSTICE ALLIANCE

Education Committee



SB 1095: An Act Concerning School Resource Officers

**IN FAVOR OF SB 1095: An act concerning School Resource Officers**

March 1, 2023

Dear chairs Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, and members of the Education Committee,

This testimony is on behalf of the [Connecticut Justice Alliance](#) (CTJA) supporting Senate Bill #1095: An act concerning school resource officers. The CTJA is a statewide youth-adult partnership working to end the criminalization of youth. The Alliance includes Justice Staff, Justice Advisors, and Steering Committee members, which include lawyers, researchers, clinicians, and social workers, who work across issues areas such as mental/behavioral health, family advocacy, substance abuse, youth services, LGBTQ+ issues, legal representation, education, community and residential services, and public policy reform.

CTJA is not only a public policy and advocacy youth/adult partnership focused on ending the criminalization of youth across our state, yet we also work closely alongside young people. We have the opportunity of working alongside the Justice Advisors in our day-to-day work, and we also get to engage with students on a weekly basis as we facilitate a program at Riverside Academy in New Haven, CT. We are extremely familiar with the impacts of police in schools, and how that differs from one town to another. This bill will help address many issues that have been identified by youth, families, researchers, and school resource officers themselves.

A part of our work at CTJA includes facilitating vision sessions. Vision sessions are conversations that we host with groups of students, incarcerated people, professionals, and more where we have solution-based conversations about how to address root issues that lead young people into the legal system. Over the past couple of years, we've been able to have these conversations with school resource officers themselves. One of the pieces of feedback we heard and found to be very common amongst all audiences was that teachers and school administrators tend to have a strong over-reliance on school resource officers when it comes to supporting a child through almost any crisis. Some examples we were given were if a child doesn't want to be in the class, disputes, mental breakdowns, and altercations. School resource officers expressed the frustration that creates because teachers no longer rely on the professionals spread across the schools - mental health workers, credible messengers, and additional staff. They immediately revert to the police. Bridgeport school resource officers have done a decent job at assessing the situation and referring the school to a school-based professional instead of a school resource officer to reduce the over-reliance, and that should be replicated statewide. If we could set clear expectations that school resource officers and school staff would follow that clearly outline when to and when not to rely on

police, we can begin to address the issue of over-reliance. Is a child having an issue with staying in class due to a conflict with another student or staff member? Bring a credible messenger, such as Ice the Beef, in to resolve the issue. Is a student being aggressive or abrasive because they came to school after dealing with a situation at home? Bring a school counselor in to resolve the issue. More importantly, we need to equip these professionals with the tools that they need to mediate conflict and manage crises.

Aside from over-reliance, Connecticut has a huge racial justice issue, and we are no strangers to the school-to-prison pipeline. Black youth make up about 12% of Connecticut's overall population, yet close to 45% of our incarcerated youth population. Connecticut Voices for Children releases very thorough reports close to annually that unpack the impact of school resource officers in schools throughout the state. In their most recent report, [2022 Protecting or Pushing Out: The Prevalence and Impact of School Resource Officers in CT](#), they highlighted that black youth are 17x more likely to be arrested in a school with a school resource officer than their white peer. This report also highlighted that there is no evidence that school resource officers actually make schools safer. Knowing this, why do we think that youth of color are being pushed out of schools at a higher rate than their white peers? Is the argument that they are inherently criminal? Is the argument that "they are simply the ones who get in trouble"? It couldn't be, because those would be examples of colorblind racism, and many insist that there is no way our officers or school officials are racist. The only explanation is that kids of color are looked at differently and since there is easy access in the school to law enforcement, they are easily funneled into the system on a daily basis. Every action when addressing a crisis needs to be taken into account. Could there have been another way to communicate with a child or support them in a time of need? Could we have taken different steps to identify the best way to intervene? We have to address this issue, and passing SB 1095 is one step toward doing so.

There are many ways to address crises in schools, and many models nationwide. Locally, we have access to organizations such as [Ice the Beef](#) working out of New Haven, [Streetsafe](#) working out of Bridgeport, and more. In neighboring states, we have models such as the [Credible Messengers Justice Center](#) that utilize trained professionals who have been previously system-impacted themselves. If we widen our scope even more nationally, there are examples such as the crisis response team [model in Oregon](#) where police aren't the first responders to crisis situations, instead, they rely on mental health professionals or even [Dads on Duty](#) based out of Louisiana. We have to reassess what health and safety look like for our children in schools.

Many say that we need school resources officers to protect our schools, but how are we protecting our students? We have to recognize that there must be clear boundaries as to why and how a school resource officer is involved in day-to-day school operations and crisis management, and passing this bill is one way to do that. CTJA is open to speaking more about this issue with anyone who may be interested and we appreciate your time.

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